

# *The Court Jews*

## *A Prelude to Emancipation*

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THE 17th and 18th centuries are the period of the court Jews in German history. It was only during this comparatively short period that individual Jews — not the Jews as such — played a vital part in the financial and business affairs of all the more important German rulers; it was only in Germany and Austria that they achieved such pre-eminence at that time: neither in the more advanced countries of western Europe, nor in the more backward countries of eastern Europe, where the large majority of the Jews lived.

A number of questions arise from this limitation of the influence of the court Jews in time as well as in area. Why were there no court Jews of any importance before the Thirty Years' War? Why did they disappear as a distinctive group with the early 19th century? Why did they not play a similar part in other countries? What were their main characteristics and distinctive features, distinguishing them from the non-Jewish financiers and businessmen of their own time and from the Jewish traders and men of affairs of other periods? What is the general importance of this period for Jewish and for German history?

In this essay an attempt will be made to answer these questions as far as our knowledge allows. Such answers have been facilitated by the publication in recent years of detailed works on the subject of the court Jews; a more general one, by Selma Stern-Taeubler, summarises her earlier and detailed work in Germany on this subject: '*The Court Jew, A Contribution to the History of the Period of Absolutism in Central Europe*', Philadelphia, 1950. A much more detailed one, by a younger German historian, Heinrich Schnee, publicises the results of his research in many North-German archives: *Die Hofffinanz und der moderne Staat, Geschichte und System der Hoffaktoren an deutschen Fürstenhöfen im Zeitalter des Absolutismus*, 3 volumes, Berlin, 1953–5. The research of both authors has shed much new light on a question of general interest. The material which they have assembled during many years deserves to be made accessible to a wider public, which might easily be deterred by the form in which it is presented and by the mass of often repetitive detail.

Both authors, as shown by the sub-titles of their books, consider the court Jews to be a feature of the period of princely despotism which began in the 16th century and came to an end with the French Revolution and Napoleon. Yet princely despotism was a general European phenomenon; absolute rule was more pronounced in France and Spain, in Russia and the Ottoman Empire, than in Germany or Austria, where the Estates of the

many principalities in question for a long time prevented the setting-up of strong governments and where the princes prevented the Emperor from ever acquiring absolute power. The court Jews, however, were a feature of these territories only, and they did not assume any importance before the middle of the 17th century.

By that time the governments of France and England were much stronger than those of Germany and Austria; France and England were advanced countries with a prosperous middle class, a well-developed machinery of taxation and a native bureaucracy which raised the money required by the government from the king's subjects. There were native bankers and merchants who would be willing to lend money to the government if they received adequate security. In England the Jews were only readmitted about the middle of the 17th century, by which time the native middle classes were strong and wielded considerable political influence through Parliament. Although the French bourgeoisie possessed no comparable institution, it dominated the administration of the kingdom, and the great tax-farmers advanced large sums to the Crown for which they recouped themselves at the cost of the people. In neither country was there any need of Jewish financiers and merchants, and the Jews did not play an important part in the economic life of the country.

The latter was also true of Spain, from which the Jews had been expelled in the late 15th century; in the 17th century Spain was in a state of decline, among the causes of which were the expulsion of the Jews and the Moors and the victimisation of their descendants, even if they had been baptised. The kings of Spain were heavily indebted to Spanish and foreign bankers, but the Inquisition did not permit the Jews to operate in Spain. In the Dutch Republic, on the other hand, Jewish bankers and merchants played an important part, side by side with those of Dutch stock. The religious toleration and civil equality prevailing in Holland, among other factors, enabled the Dutch Republic to become the most advanced country economically and the most important money market of Europe.

The rising prices of the 16th century and the growing expenditure of the rulers at a time when their revenues remained stationary forced many princes to resort to borrowing, partly from their own subjects, partly from foreign bankers and moneylenders. Germany and Austria were no exception to this rule: not only the Habsburg Emperor, but the large majority of the territorial princes became heavily indebted, however wealthy they originally had been. Not even the introduction of the Reformation and the confiscation of church property proved a solution of their financial problems, any more than those of Henry VIII were solved by the dissolution of the monasteries.

The German princes of the 16th century, however, did not borrow from the Jews: Germany was still a very wealthy country with flourishing towns connected by the main arteries of European trade. The Habsburgs and the

other princes were able to borrow large sums from the great German banking houses, such as the Fuggers and the Welser, and equally from their own subjects. The pronounced impecuniousness of the rulers and their constant need for money were the main cause of the rise of the Estates. In most territories the Estates took over their ruler's debts, but only against weighty concessions in the political and economic fields. In many cases the Estates themselves took over the financial administration of the principality, the levying and collecting of taxes, the control of revenue and expenditure, and thus securely established their political power. The large sums of money they granted year after year to pay off their ruler's debts are proof of the wealth available in the country.

All this changed with the outbreak of the Thirty Years' War and the collapse of the great banking houses, partly as a result of the war, partly as a result of the bankruptcies of the Spanish kings, to whom the Fuggers and the Welser had advanced many millions. The frightful debasement of the coinage at the time of the *Kipper und Wipper* ruined all credit and caused a general cessation of trade.<sup>1</sup> Whatever wealth there still was, whatever was produced or hidden away, whatever escaped the depredations of the ill-disciplined soldiery, was consumed by the long drawn-out war. Heavy contributions had to be paid to occupying armies, many towns were sacked or pillaged; Germany became a battlefield of the armies of Europe. Even after the end of the struggle heavy war indemnities had to be paid to France and Sweden. Nor was there any chance of an economic recovery.

Only a few years after the end of the Thirty Years' War, the first great War of the North broke out, followed by the wars of Louis XIV, during which large parts of Germany were systematically devastated by the French. Even in the areas not affected by these wars the burdens imposed upon the impoverished inhabitants increased steeply, for it became every ruler's ambition to have a standing army, a *miles perpetuus*, in place of the mercenary forces hired only in case of war. It became equally every ruler's ambition to imitate the great king at Versailles, to construct at least a little Versailles on the banks of the Isar, the Spree or the Elbe, to vie with his rivals in luxury and splendour, in dazzling festivals and ostentatious buildings. The princes needed money and more money, but there were no longer any native bankers to whom they could turn, nor were their subjects able to lend them millions as in the preceding century.

This situation proved the great opportunity for those Jews who provided the armies with food and fodder, bought the soldiers' booty at advantageous

<sup>1</sup>In Württemberg, for example, the debased guilder was no longer accepted by the neighbouring districts and the bad coins flooded back into the Duchy. Eventually, in 1623, a decree was promulgated putting the value of the debased guilder at one-sixth of its original value (10 instead of 60 kreuzers), and that of the debased shilling at one-third (2 instead of 6 pfennigs). Through this decree the Estates of the Duchy alone suffered a loss of 248,551 guilders: Christian Friedrich Sattler, *Geschichte des Herzogthums Württemberg unter der Regierung der Herzogen*, Ulm, 1773, Vol. VI, pp. 194, 200; State Archives, Stuttgart, A. 34—5, Büschel 40, no. 27; Büschel 41, no. 4c.

prices and traded in the wake of the armies. Because there were so many princes and because they all needed loans so badly, this was the opportunity not only for a few Jews attached to one court, but for dozens and even hundreds, working for many different princes, to supply them with what they needed, or rather more often what they did not need. Because there were so many small states, all trying to foster their own trade and industry and to hinder that of their neighbours, because there were so many customs frontiers and staple rights, because there was no unity and no economic policy, the economic recovery of Germany and of the native middle classes was delayed to a very considerable degree.

Thus the court Jews filled a real gap and many princes simply could not manage without them. Already during the great war many princes and generals, such as the Habsburgs and their generalissimo Wallenstein, had protected the Jewish ghettos against looting and requisitioning because they needed the money of the Jews for the conduct of the war. Especially in the trade with precious metals the Jews now predominated. The enormous destruction of capital increased rather than decreased this dependence on the Jews after the end of the war. Many of the court Jews of the later 17th and 18th centuries were the descendants of people who had made their fortunes during the Thirty Years' War.<sup>2</sup> In this respect, as in so many others, the great war exercised a profound influence upon the course of German history.

It was, above all, the financial needs of the rulers which induced them to use the services of the court Jews. Whether it was the court which had to be supplied with money, or the army which had to be maintained; whether the outbreak of a war led to increased expenditure, or economic experiments were to be carried out in peace-time; whether jewels had to be procured, debts to be settled or loans to be raised, it was to the Jews that the princes turned in their predicament when all other means had failed. When Augustus the Strong of Saxony required millions of thalers to further his election to the Polish throne, it was to the Jew Behrend Lehmann that he addressed his demands, apart from his own Estates. When the same prince was in a state of the greatest distress owing to the outbreak of the War of the North in the early 18th century and his army had to be provided with food, shoes, horses and other necessities, it was Lehmann and his brothers-in-law who supplied his needs. When Archbishop Joseph Clemens of Cologne found the subsidies of Louis XIV insufficient to satisfy his political ambitions and his lust for glory and luxury, he turned to Meyer zum Goldstein and Joseph Cassel to furnish his requirements of clothes, silk, velvet, jewels, food, fodder, etc. Many more Jews were employed by the Archbishop after his return to Cologne in 1715, when the war of the Spanish Succession ended.

Above all it was the Habsburg Emperors — whose treasury was always

<sup>2</sup>Schnee, *op. cit.*, I, 79; II, 223; III, 173, 178—9.

empty and who often could not pay the troops engaged in the long drawn-out wars against the Turks — who had to rely on the aid of Jewish bankers and financiers. Samuel Oppenheimer in Vienna paid the subsidies the Emperor had promised to other German states, provisioned and paid the army and bore a large part of the cost of the war. Margrave Louis of Baden, commander of the Imperial troops, confessed that without Oppenheimer the war could not have been carried on and everything would have ended in defeat. Upon Oppenheimer's death in 1703 Samson Wertheimer had to undertake the financing of military operations in the Low Countries, Germany and Italy, during the War of the Spanish Succession, the payment of generals, officials and ambassadors, and of the princes of the Empire who received Imperial subsidies. Wertheimer placed his entire credit at the disposal of the Emperor's brother Charles, the claimant to the Spanish throne, on whose behalf the allies fought against Louis XIV. When the peace conference finally met at Utrecht, Wertheimer had to pay the expenses of the Imperial ambassador as well as the costs of the conference, which Charles, now himself the Emperor, was unable to provide, exactly as Oppenheimer had paid the expenses of the peace conferences of Ryswick and Carlowitz at the end of the 17th century.<sup>3</sup>

The Habsburgs were strict Catholics, but they preferred to employ Jewish financiers because they could supply their needs more cheaply and, above all, because they were prepared to wait longer for their payment. The Emperor did not possess the administrative machinery to pay and supply the army, so that the court Jews were indispensable. The Emperor Leopold, for reasons of conscience, would have preferred to use non-Jewish entrepreneurs, but the attempt failed because they could not compete with the Jewish ones. It was only in the 19th century that the army administration became sufficiently developed to supply itself the requirements of the forces with the result that the Jewish suppliers and financiers were no longer needed. Yet as late as 1806, when the Duchy of Brunswick was occupied by the army of Napoleon, it was a Jewish banker, Israel Jacobson, who had to raise the lion's share of the war contribution of 5,625,000 francs that was imposed upon the Duchy. As late as 1812–17 the firm of Berend & Co. lent nearly 2,500,000 thalers to the Prussian state, more than any other Berlin bankers did during these years when the financial fortunes of Prussia were at a very low ebb on account of the war against Napoleon. Jewish banking houses continued to be among the leading firms of the Prussian capital. When the Dresdner Bank was established in 1865, Jewish bankers were most prominent among the founders.<sup>4</sup> Since the 17th century the machinery of the Prussian state was much more highly developed than that of the Habsburgs, yet in times of war and financial difficulty it had to use Jewish firms and entrepreneurs. This was especially true during the

<sup>3</sup>Schnee, *op. cit.*, II, 172, 180; III, 14–16; Stern, *op. cit.*, pp. 86–7, 92–3.

<sup>4</sup>Schnee, *op. cit.*, I, 212–4; II, 255; III, 198; Stern, *op. cit.*, pp. 29, 93.

Seven Years' War, when Frederick the Great employed several Jews to carry through the debasement of the coinage, above all in conquered Saxony, without which the King would not have been able to hold out against his many enemies. The result was that the neighbouring states imitated his example and Germany was flooded with heavily debased coins, to the detriment of all trade and enterprise. The Jews were particularly suitable for such purposes because they dominated the trade in precious metals and, through their family and other connections, could buy up the good coins and distribute the new bad ones. Whenever a ruler wanted to debase the coinage he would make use of the Jews, who then earned the opprobrium of the people, the victims of these practices, in place of the prince on whose orders they acted.

Jewish financiers and entrepreneurs, however, were not only active in supplying the armies, in financing wars, in arranging loans and settling debts; they were also prominent in the fields of trade and industry. Many court Jews supplied jewels to the princes for whom they worked. In 1720 Moses Levin Gomperz, of the famous family from Cleves, was entrusted by Frederick William I of Prussia with the sale of hundreds of jewels, estimated at 220,000 thalers, in Amsterdam, but was only able to sell about one-third of them. In 1732 Jacob Gomperz, a member of the same family, undertook to procure for the King well-grown giant grenadiers at the price of 300 thalers for one of six feet, 400 thalers for one of 73 inches, 500 for one of 74 inches, 1000 thalers for one of 75 inches, and as many as 2000 thalers for a recruit of 76 inches.

In Mecklenburg at the end of the 17th century two court Jews were even granted a monopoly of the trade in jewels and silver, against the protest of the local goldsmiths. They also acquired a monopoly of the tobacco trade and held it for many years, until in 1708 the government and the Estates achieved the abolition of all monopolies. Later the government declared that monopolies were contrary to the constitution of the Duchy and detrimental to commerce.

A well-known example of a successful merchant is Moses Jacobson de Jonge, who in 1664 was permitted to take his permanent residence at Memel, at a time when the Jews were still excluded from the Duchy of Prussia. He soon established a flourishing trade with Poland, Lithuania and Livonia, almost monopolised the highly important salt trade, limiting the quantities he imported from Holland so that the price remained high. He bought up so many goods that he could load whole ships and deprived local merchants of their livelihood: matters which caused frequent complaints. During the years 1694–96 he paid 80 per cent more in customs duties than all the other merchants of Memel put together, so that the electoral revenue increased considerably and the King of Poland attempted to attract the successful merchant to his country. No wonder the ever-repeated complaints of the town of Memel, which were taken up by the

Estates, about de Jonge and his practices met with no success. The Great Elector, as well as his son, the first King of Prussia, energetically took the side of de Jonge. At the end of the century four Christian merchants were severely punished for attacking him, and the urban authorities of Memel were severely reprimanded, while de Jonge's privileges were renewed by the Elector in spite of all local protests.<sup>5</sup>

The majority of the court Jews engaged in trade, especially in that in jewels and precious metals. In Prussia, however, where the development of the native middle classes was much retarded by the backwardness of the country and the military interests of the Hohenzollerns, Jews were instrumental in fostering the growth of industry. Under Frederick William I Levi Ulff founded a ribbon factory at Charlottenburg which supplied the army. David Hirsch founded in Berlin an important cloth factory and later, at Potsdam, a factory for the manufacture of velvet and plush. His workmen were recruited in Holland, France and Switzerland at royal expense. In 1731 he was granted a monopoly for velvet, and two years later one for plush, privileges against which the Berlin merchants objected in vain. In 1736 the import of all foreign velvets was forbidden, so that Hirsch now possessed a complete monopoly. His heirs added a silk factory.

In 1752 Bernhard Isaak was granted a concession for a silk factory in Berlin and a few years later for another one at Potsdam, in which Moses Mendelssohn was employed as a bookkeeper and overseer. Other silk manufacturers were Moses Ries, Isaak Benjamin Wulff, David Friedländer, Israel Markus and Levi Moses Levi, so that Jewish entrepreneurs predominated in this branch of industry so much fostered by Frederick the Great. Since 1745 Veitel Ephraim was engaged at Potsdam in the manufacture of Brussels lace; he employed 200 orphan girls, who were trained by him, and he possessed a monopoly for this manufacture. In 1762 he and his sons took over the manufacture of gold and silver braid and galloon, which was also carried on in the Potsdam orphanage; for this they received a monopoly which the family possessed until 1820. In 1752 Benjamin Elias Wulff founded a cotton and calico factory in the Tiergarten, for which he received royal support. At Breslau Jewish financiers founded cotton and cloth factories, at a time when the Christian merchants could not be persuaded to invest in industry.

In no other German state were there so many and so important Jewish industrialists as in Prussia. It was the considered policy of Frederick the Great to induce his wealthy court Jews to invest part of their profits in industrial enterprises. In Brunswick, Hanover and Mecklenburg we find Jewish tobacco manufacturers, appointed and privileged by the rulers of

<sup>5</sup>Schnee, *op. cit.*, I, 82, 89, 106—7; II, 296—7; *Urkunden und Actenstücke zur Geschichte des Kurfürsten Friedrich Wilhelm von Brandenburg*, XVI, Berlin, 1899, pp. 636, 659, 662, 778—9, 809, 816, 989; State Archives, Königsberg, *Ostpreussische Folianten*, Vol. 698, fos. 261, 823—4; Vol. 702, pp. 323, 1372; Vol. 712, nos. 4—5; Vol. 713, pp. 281—2; Vol. 718, fos. 1268, 1328; Vol. 723, nos. 32, 42.

those principalities; but the Jewish pre-eminence in the textile industries was a Prussian phenomenon. Frederick the Great favoured the court Jews by all the means at his disposal because they helped him to achieve the aims of his mercantilist policy.<sup>6</sup>

Through their manifold activities the court Jews were brought into intimate contact with the internal government of many German principalities and became advisors in matters of financial administration and taxation. In 1700 Ruben Elias Gomperz was appointed chief tax collector for the Duchies of Cleves and Mark, against which the local government as well as the Estates protested strongly, but these protests were overruled by the Elector Frederick III. Many Jews were employed on diplomatic missions and as diplomatic representatives. Thus Behrend Lehmann played an important part as the political agent of Augustus the Strong of Saxony, especially in connection with his election to the Polish throne; for these services he was appointed the king's resident in the Lower Saxon Circle and maintained a grand establishment at Halberstadt.

In Anhalt Moses Benjamin Wulff actively participated in the diplomatic negotiations through which the wife of Leopold of Anhalt-Dessau was elevated to the princely Estate; later he was entrusted with diplomatic missions in Vienna in connection with the investiture of Leopold by the Emperor with the whole of Anhalt and with the introduction of primogeniture in the principality, for which the assent of the Emperor was required. In Brunswick Alexander David was not only the banker and jeweller, but also the political agent of the dukes. In Mecklenburg the Hinrichsens fulfilled similar functions as late as the 19th century.<sup>7</sup> At some of these smaller courts Jewish influence was especially pronounced, for there the ruler had fewer resources and often found it difficult to overcome the opposition of his Estates, who in certain instances controlled the government; thus the Jews were a welcome counter-weight against the local influences which the ruler wanted to curtail.

The most famous example of the court Jew who wielded political influence, if only for a brief period, was Süss Oppenheimer, better known as Jud Süss, who acted as the confidential advisor to Duke Charles Alexander of Württemberg. Charles Alexander was a convert to Roman Catholicism; he succeeded his Lutheran predecessor in October 1733 and died in March 1737. In a strictly Lutheran Duchy, in which the Estates for centuries had wielded considerable influence, he aimed at making himself absolute, at increasing the small standing army to 12,000 men, at introducing much heavier taxation and at gaining a better, if not a dominant, status for Roman Catholics. In his endeavours he was helped by newly-appointed Catholic officers and officials, by the Prince-Bishop of Würzburg and

<sup>6</sup>Schnee, *op. cit.*, I, 116—7, 148—9, 182—5, 189—90; II, 82, 88—9, 296; III, 180, 187; Stern, *op. cit.*, pp. 152—6.

<sup>7</sup>Schnee, *op. cit.*, I, 86; II, 91—4, 173, 180, 188, 264—5, 304—8.

Bamberg, a protagonist of princely power and Catholicism, and by Süss Oppenheimer, who was made a Privy Finance Councillor and Cabinet Treasurer. He was entrusted with procuring the financial means for this policy, with the mint and with matters of wardship and taxation, and thus naturally came into open conflict with the Estates who controlled the financial administration.

According to the Estates' declaration 'against the evil councillors' of the late Duke, drawn up a few weeks after his death, Süss had advised the Duke to arrest the Estates' leaders. With respect to the old treaties which guaranteed the Estates' privileges, they accused him of holding the opinion that it was to be borne in mind at what times they had been concluded: what had been good years ago was no longer suitable at present and, if the Duke found that laws and customs stood in his way, he was the only one who could alter them. In Süss' opinion, the subjects had no right to share in the government or to question their ruler's actions; if they offered resistance, force should be used. The Catholic general who was put in command of the army curtly informed the Estates' deputies that subjects had no right to put conditions to their prince, who had the right to issue orders; a clever prince knew himself what was good for his subjects and did not need any Estates; when the French *Parlement* had not obeyed the king he had assembled 10,000 men to make his will felt, and the same fate, he threatened, could befall the Estates.<sup>8</sup>

These plans were in accordance with the general tendencies of the age: representative government and the liberties of the Estates were considered out-of-date, and people admired the police state which the Hohenzollerns had established in Prussia. Yet these plans failed because of Charles Alexander's premature death and the accession of a minor duke: an opportunity which the Estates used to take vengeance on their late master's tools. Süss Oppenheimer was immediately arrested because of the pernicious advice he had rendered, together with several other officials and officers. After a lengthy trial he was publicly hanged in Stuttgart in February 1738 because 'he had sown distrust against the ministers, councillors and Estates, had infringed all basic treaties and rent asunder all laws and constitutions.' He became a victim of the policy he had advocated, while the other culprits escaped with more lenient punishments. The despised Jew was the object of general hatred and was considered guilty of 'countless crimes such as had not been committed by any Jew in Christian countries'.<sup>9</sup> In reality, however, he had been merely the spokesman of the tendency towards princely despotism.

We may have sympathy with him; but we can also sympathise with the political aspirations of his enemies. They succeeded in preserving their

<sup>8</sup>State Archives, Stuttgart, *Tomi Actorum Provincialium Wurtembergicorum*, Vol. 142, fos. 621—4; Vol. 144, fos. 289—92; Vol. 145, fos. 180—95; Vol. 148, fos. 553, 557—9, 569; Stern, *op. cit.*, pp. 130—1; Schnee, *op. cit.*, III, 189.

<sup>9</sup>State Archives, Stuttgart, *Tomi Actorum*, Vol. 145, fo. 128; Vol. 146, fos. 19—20.

liberties and privileges and thereby ensured that the Württemberg constitution was preserved and that the tradition of representative government did not die out, in contrast with the development in many other German principalities. In my opinion, it is not justified to say that these absolute rulers and their 'restless activity . . . served to stimulate the political and economic energies of the populations', and that 'Württemberg was in a condition of stagnation', as Selma Stern does. The Württemberg burghers and peasants were very active in the political as well as the economic field, and Württemberg was more highly developed than Prussia. In Prussia it was not only the general, unpropitious conditions of the country, but also the dead-weight of the over-large army and the policy of her rulers which prevented a progressive development, especially in the political field, while the prevalence of serfdom militated against economic progress. Nor am I able to agree with her that Charles Alexander's 'own desires were identical with the interests of the country and his personal ambition served as an invigorating force in the State of Württemberg', that he 'considered it his chief task to bring order into the economy, pay off the country's debts, restore its credit and adjust expenditures and revenues'.<sup>10</sup> If Charles Alexander's plans had been carried through, Württemberg would have been burdened with the maintenance of a large army and a magnificent court and this would have frustrated its economic development. The country's debts resulted from the ambitions of previous rulers; Charles Alexander's ambitions would have added to them and would have involved the country in many wars with its neighbours, as Selma Stern herself admits. Surely, in this case, the Estates served the interest of their country much better than an over-ambitious Duke whose policy was opposed by the whole country. Surely, it is not the task of the historian to extol the example of Prussia and of her kings, however much their contemporaries might have been impressed by her might and her success.

In other principalities also the Estates were bitterly opposed to the admittance of the Jews and to the privileges granted to the court Jews. Partly they saw in the Jews the representatives of an absolutist policy, but primarily they feared for their economic interests. The many monopolies which were entrusted to the Jews were particularly obnoxious to the towns which everywhere formed one of the Estates. The dues and customs paid by the Jews went directly to the prince and were not liable to the financial control which the Estates exercised in many principalities; they thus weakened them, while the ruler's financial position became stronger. Equally, in many principalities the officials themselves were members of the Estates and thus less reliable from the ruler's point of view than complete strangers. The Estates in their turn were not only opposed to the Jews, but to all newcomers, especially when these belonged to a religion different from their own. In the complaints of the Estates of Brandenburg and

<sup>10</sup>Stern, *op. cit.*, pp. 118—9.

Prussia the Jews were put side by side with Arians, Baptists, Mennonists, Quakers, Socinians, Weigelians, Zwinglians, 'and other heretics'.<sup>11</sup> All these were equally obnoxious to the strictly Lutheran inhabitants of the Hohenzollern provinces; while their ruler, who was a Calvinist and for that reason opposed to Lutheran orthodoxy, welcomed all immigrants with open arms because his territories were so backward and so thinly populated. Thus the Jews became a focal point in the struggle between the ruler and the Estates. Wherever these were defeated the court Jews reaped the benefit and served the absolute state which protected them.

As swift as was the rise of many court Jews, as swift could be their decline. It is true that certain families, such as the Gomperz in Cleves or the Hinrichsens in Mecklenburg, retained their influence for generations. Frequently, however, the court Jews became the scapegoats of a policy which they merely executed. Often it was the death of a ruler and the accession of his successor which caused the fall of the favourites of the previous reign: a contingency against which some court Jews tried to insure themselves by keeping in the good books of the heir to the throne. Everywhere not only the Estates, but even more so the people, the tradesmen and artisans were bitterly hostile to the Jews, from whose competition they suffered. Their hatred was directed not against the prince, who was surrounded by the trappings of divine right and so high that he could not be reached by their criticisms, but against his 'evil councillors' who levied taxes in his name and carried out his policy. Among these councillors the Jews were particularly vulnerable because they had no recognised status, because they were strong only if protected by the prince: the moment this protection was withdrawn they fell and could be attacked with impunity. They presented a tempting target through their great wealth and outward splendour, especially at times of war or economic crisis. It was for these reasons that so many court Jews fell, rather than 'because they were the bearers of a new and revolutionary political and economic conception which was bitterly attacked by the old legitimist powers', as Selma Stern thinks.<sup>12</sup> The ideas of absolute government and economic mercantilism had existed long before the 18th century; since the 16th century Germany had been the home of great banking houses; the 'feudal and patrimonial forces of the Middle Ages' had long withered away; no revolution was as yet threatening the established order. The anti-Semitism of the masses could easily be unleashed for less deep-seated reasons, for they were suffering under the exactions of vexatious and arbitrary governments.

The wealth and luxury displayed by many court Jews indeed made them an easy target of popular wrath. Many maintained great houses and loved ostentatious, grand displays, as so many princes and nobles did. The town

<sup>11</sup> *Urkunden und Actenstücke zur Geschichte des Kurfürsten Friedrich Wilhelm von Brandenburg*, X, pp. 233—4; XV, pp. 399, 522, 526; XVI, pp. 31—2, 365, 435, 437, 491, 494, 530, 535, 538, 558, 564, 610—11, 767, 815, 887.

<sup>12</sup> Stern, *op. cit.*, pp. 13, 266—7.

council of Mannheim complained bitterly that the court Jews occupied the most beautiful houses in the best streets and used magnificent carriages. Behrend Lehmann at Halberstadt drove about in a carriage with six horses, two liveried servants standing in front and one behind. Diego Texeira was seen driving through Hamburg in such a magnificent carriage that bystanders mistook him for a prince.

The town council of Mannheim in 1717 forbade the Jews to wear clothes embroidered with gold or silver. In 1719 the Senate of Hamburg issued a decree against the luxurious dresses worn by the Jews and forbade them to appear at the exchange with walking-sticks, swords or pistols. In the same year Moses Levin Gomperz was granted the privilege to carry a sword by Frederick William I. His grandfather's house in Cleves was described by a Jewish visitor as the 'house of a king, in all manners furnished like the palace of a ruler'. Süss Oppenheimer possessed houses in Frankfurt and Stuttgart which he furnished with costly furniture and paintings by Rubens, Teniers, Jordaeus, van der Velde and other Dutch painters, with precious china, rare engravings, gold vessels and beautifully bound books. The court Jews wore short coloured coats in the French or Spanish style and wigs like noblemen, their wives multicoloured heavy gowns of silk and velvet, with puffed wide sleeves and long trains, and beautiful jewels. As early as 1644 a pamphlet published in Hamburg accused them of wearing gold and silver, pearls and diamonds. Süss Oppenheimer, dressed in a coat of red silk, conversed gracefully with the Duchess and the court ladies; like his master he maintained an official mistress. Many princes, noblemen and ambassadors were entertained by the court Jews in a princely style; the weddings of their children were attended by illustrious guests, such as the Crown Prince of Prussia, the later Frederick I, Prince John Maurice of Nassau, the Crown Prince of Saxony; Queen Christina of Sweden stayed at Diego Texeira's house in Hamburg.<sup>13</sup>

Some court Jews not only acquired grand town houses, but extensive landed property. Thus Behrend Lehmann possessed the castle of Seeburg with thirteen villages, a noble estate at Blankenburg and many large estates in western Poland around Lissa. Israel Jacobson, early in the 19th century, owned six estates in Mecklenburg, nine more near Magdeburg and in central Germany, a country seat at Steglitz outside Berlin and other landed property. The court Jews were not only assimilated in their way of life, their manners and their clothes to the ways of the ruling-classes, but equally in their ideas and their *esprit*. There was a gulf between them and the mass of ordinary Jews who lived in ghettos, wore their distinctive dress and were sharply distinguished by their religious and other habits from the people amongst whom they lived. Naturally the court Jews early tried to gain permission to dwell outside the ghettos in the new quarters of the towns, and this wish was frequently granted. In matters of religion Süss Oppen-

<sup>13</sup>Schnee, *op. cit.*, I, 80, 88; II, 188; III, 211; Stern, *op. cit.*, pp. 104—10, 227—36.

heimer and some other court Jews were sceptical; he did not attend the synagogue nor keep the Jewish dietary laws. He once confessed that he was a voluntary member of all religious creeds; he had absorbed the spirit of the early enlightenment wholeheartedly. Yet he did all his business with other Jews and gave the contracts for military and court supplies only to them; and he obtained permission for the Jews to settle in Württemberg, thus arousing the enmity of the population.<sup>14</sup>

The emancipated court Jews often quarrelled or bickered with the ghetto Jews. These conflicts became particularly acrimonious when a court Jew was appointed by the prince as head of the Jewish communities of the principality in question. Thus the Great Elector made Berend Levi 'commander in chief' or *shtadlan* in all Brandenburg territories to the west of the Elbe. As an official of the new state he acted entirely in the interest of the ruler. The result was that the Jews of Cleves and Mark, and soon also those of other provinces, revolted against his 'tyrannical rule' and his 'lack of modesty'. They were joined by the Estates of Cleves and Mark, by the town of Wesel and by the governor, Prince John Maurice of Nassau, while Levi was upheld by the central government in Berlin. The combined opposition, however, achieved that after two years he was dismissed as the leader of the Jews of Cleves and Mark and only retained his position with regard to Halberstadt, Minden and Ravensberg.

Leading among the opposition in Cleves had been the Gomperz family; but in 1717 Moses Levin Gomperz was appointed Chief Elder of the Jews of Berlin and all the Prussian territories; and two years later he was granted the right to carry a sword 'like other servants' of the King. During the preceding reign the Berlin Jewish community was dominated by Esther Liebmann, who succeeded her husband as court jeweller and banker; she was feared and hated by her co-religionists and ruled them with an iron hand through her son who was appointed Chief Elder. Under Frederick the Great the Berlin Jews complained that their Chief Elder, the court Jew Veitel Ephraim, forced them to submit to his laws, and that he held meetings in his own house so that he could exclude those he disliked. These Chief Elders received salaries and behaved like royal officials, acting not in the interests of their co-religionists, but in those of the government whose instruments they were.<sup>15</sup>

Although the court Jews were very assimilated in their way of life and their mode of thinking, although they were far removed from the world of the ghetto, they remained Jews. They studied the Thora and the Talmud, they possessed Hebrew libraries, had the works of Jewish scholars and religious books printed at their own expense, invited learned rabbis to stay with them and had poor Jewish students attached to their households. Wherever they settled with their large families and establishments they

<sup>14</sup>Schnee, *op. cit.*, II, 150—1, 199, 249—50; III, 220; Stern, *op. cit.*, pp. 227, 238—40.

<sup>15</sup>Schnee, *op. cit.*, I, 66—7, 88, 97—100; III, 221; Stern, *op. cit.*, pp. 181—6.

tried to gain permission for other Jews to follow them, and they often interceded with the authorities on behalf of their co-religionists; for many princes made a sharp distinction between the court Jews, whom they needed, and the others, to whom they were reluctant to grant permits of residence and to extend the facilities enjoyed by the court Jews. Many of the latter founded synagogues or Jewish schools, or left considerable sums for such foundations. Thus Michael David at Hanover gave a synagogue to the Jewish community and founded an institute to further Jewish learning. His son founded a school for Jewish boys which existed till the early 20th century. At Hanover Isaak Jacob Gans set aside a capital of 30,000 thalers, the interest of which was to support poor Jews, to educate two Jewish boys, to pay a Jewish scholar and to provide lights for the synagogue. Alexander David gave a synagogue to the Jewish communities of Brunswick and of Wolfenbüttel. Behrend Lehmann built a house at Halberstadt for three Jewish scholars, with a library and a synagogue, and used his connections to further the admittance of Jews at Halle and Dresden. Salomon Oppenheim at Cologne and Joseph Jacob van Geldern at Düsseldorf built synagogues for the Jewish communities of their town. If they prospered the court Jews felt that this was due to God's grace, and they were willing to render Him their thanks and their homage in this visible and lasting form.<sup>16</sup>

Yet in many instances the descendants of the court Jews, especially in the 19th century, left the religion of their fathers. They were baptised, intermarried with Christian families, often of great wealth or rank, and in many cases themselves acquired patents of nobility. They quickly merged with the German people; they not only infused new wealth into many an impoverished noble family, but their sons quickly rose to important positions in state and society. The sons and grandsons of Baer Moses Levy Isaak became Prussian officers. One of them in 1866 commanded the Prussian forces which defeated the Hanoverians and forced them to capitulate, and became a lieutenant-general. A grand-daughter of Veitel Ephraim, court and mint Jew of Frederick the Great, married in 1797 Prince Henry XIV of Reuss, a member of a ruling dynasty and a Field-Marshal in the Imperial army.

Many sons of court Jews bought noble estates and became squires; their sons studied at Bonn, Heidelberg or Göttingen and joined the feudal students' corporations of Borussia or Saxonia; if possible they served with the guards' cavalry, the most exclusive regiment of the Prussian army. Only a few of them were active in commerce or industry where little social prestige could be gained; for in Germany there was no close interlinking between the world of the city and that of the broad acres which has always been characteristic of English society. Thus the Junker class received new blood and new strength, but this did not contribute towards merging its members

<sup>16</sup>Schnee, *op. cit.*, II, 14, 73, 75, 82, 99, 178, 188, 270; III, 53, 64, 116, 191—2; Stern, *op. cit.*, pp. 210—26.

with those of other classes; its power and its exclusiveness were maintained until the end of the Hohenzollern monarchy. In Austria also, from the end of the 18th century onwards, the great Jewish families were ennobled and became barons; while their wives, daughters of Berlin court Jews, demonstratively showed their Prussian sentiments and became hysterical if anybody made anti-Prussian remarks, showing how quickly and to what extent the Prussian Jews took over the national prejudices and the ideology of the leading social group, whose equals they wanted to become and whose ranks they wanted to enter.<sup>17</sup>

How can we explain the amazing rise of so many court Jews within such a short time? It was not only the weakness or decline of the native middle class that gave them their opportunity after the Thirty Years' War which had destroyed so much capital and so many goods. It was also the fact that they possessed special qualifications which made them eminently suitable for their task, such as great experience in trade and money matters. They had no ties with the Estates or any other native group, but were entirely at the disposal of the prince, his tools which could be made and unmade. They had close links with their co-religionists all over Europe and thus received from them important commercial and political news; they could use them as agents and middlemen and could buy from them and sell to them. They thus possessed a whole network of agents and suppliers, living in the most important trading centres, in Holland with its banking facilities, in Frankfurt and Leipzig with their fairs. As the mediaeval merchants had done, they often sent out their sons and nephews to represent them in other towns or countries and used them as their aids in the family business. They possessed more capital than their rivals and, above all, better credit facilities; they could afford to wait longer for payment and thus secure valuable orders with no immediate prospect of payment, which their rivals had to decline.

Most of the great families of court Jews intermarried and were related to each other; they were 'one large family', especially those of Berlin, Breslau, Dresden, Leipzig, Brunswick, Hanover, Dessau, and concluded matrimonial alliances with those of Vienna and southern Germany.<sup>18</sup> It seems much more doubtful, however, whether their success was also due 'to their spiritual attitude and piety based on their study of the Talmud and Thora', whether there was 'an internal connection between the Jewish religion and moral teaching, between the Old Testament puritanical spirit and the economic activities of the court Jews', as asserted by Dr. Schnee, following the ideas of Max Weber and Werner Sombart. This much, however, is probably true that the Jews, like the Calvinists, were especially hardworking and determined to be successful, especially eager to escape from the

<sup>17</sup>Schnee, *op. cit.*, I, 54, 133—4, 161, 175—6, 244; II, 152, 202, 252, 255; III, 53, 155, 217—8, with many examples of ennoblements etc.

<sup>18</sup>Stern, *op. cit.*, pp. 18, 27—8, 43; Schnee, *op. cit.*, III, 180—I, 221.

poverty of the ghetto. On the other hand, it seems to be quite erroneous to attempt to explain the outstanding successes of Süss Oppenheimer and Michael von Derenburg by their alleged 'mixed' racial origin, based on the popular legend of their time, as Dr. Schnee does.<sup>19</sup> As there are many more rational explanations, such theories are of little value.

In general it seems a pity that Dr. Schnee's careful and detailed researches in many archives are marred by an anti-Jewish bias which is especially apparent in his first volume. This is perhaps not surprising in view of the fact that he published the first results of his work in notorious Nazi journals during the last war;<sup>20</sup> but it seems that the eight years between the end of the war and the publication of his new book did not substantially modify his views. For example, he makes two quite uncalled-for remarks against Heinrich Heine, asserting that his real name was Chajim Bückeburg and calling a somewhat shady financier 'the true ancestor' of Heine; but there is no evidence whatever for the first assertion in the section on the Heine family in the third volume.<sup>21</sup>

It is also contradictory to maintain of one court Jew that he 'naturally made substantial profits', while stating on the same page that he went bankrupt; or to assert of the same man that he 'was financially in a very favourable position' because he received one hundred thalers a year plus certain allowances for food and fodder, while we find in the later volumes that the great court Jews received, in addition to such allowances, salaries of 300 to 400, and that salaries of 150 or 200 thalers were 'not particularly high'.<sup>22</sup> The Jews who were employed by Frederick the Great to debase the coinage are criticised because they lacked 'all noble motives, all interest in the state'; and several Jewish banking-houses because they declined to lend money to the Prussian government after the defeat of Jena and Auerstädt:<sup>23</sup> as though the bankers and financiers of other creeds had made profits out of the nobility of their hearts. It seems equally superfluous to express surprise that a court Jew bought jewels at an auction for 54,000 thalers and subsequently sold them singly for 57,000, a profit of less than six per cent; or that at other auctions the Jews reached an agreement not to bid against each other and in consequence the prices remained low, a practice known to dealers at auctions all over the world.<sup>24</sup>

A greater knowledge of business affairs would have shown Dr. Schnee that there is nothing particularly 'Jewish' in such practices, and it would have been better if such petty criticisms had been suppressed. It seems even more unnecessary to say that Moses Levin Gomperz 'had apparently gone

<sup>19</sup>Schnee, *op. cit.*, III, 192, 200, 253.

<sup>20</sup>See *Weltkampf — Die Judenfrage in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, 1944, pp. 91 ff. and *Deutsches Archiv für Landes- und Volksforschung*, VIII, 1944, pp. 367 ff.

<sup>21</sup>Schnee, *op. cit.*, I, 68, 75; III, 112—22.

<sup>22</sup>*Ibid.*, I, 50; II, 35; III, 54, 207—8.

<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*, I, 92, 130, 213.

<sup>24</sup>*Ibid.*, III, 17, 35—6.

off his head' because he 'dared' to appear in front of Frederick William I in a kind of uniform imitating that of the giant grenadiers, especially in view of the fact that the king expected his servants to wear uniform.<sup>25</sup> Gomperz probably hoped that his action would please the king: that this was not the case and that the king used his stick on the unfortunate Jew is much more indicative of the lack of mental balance of Frederick William I than of Gomperz.

If Dr. Schnee's comments are sometimes uncalled for, it must also be recognised that his research has brought to light many new facts and interesting details. I would agree with his general conclusion that the court Jews were only one of the many aids and supports of the modern state; even in the financial field their contribution should not be overestimated.<sup>26</sup> The main financial contribution to the creation of the Prussian or the Bavarian state came from taxation, i.e. from the non-privileged classes. It was the burghers and the peasants who were taxed extremely heavily so that their rulers would be able to follow a policy of expansion and aggrandisement. It was the peasants' sons who served in the armies which conquered new provinces. It was the state officials who administered the revenues and domains, collected the taxes and acted as the long arm of the ruler reaching into every corner of his territories. Nobody would deny that the court Jews fulfilled important and useful functions; but their work has to be estimated in comparison with the contributions of other groups and other organs of the absolute state. Their role came to an end with the general economic progress of Germany in the 19th century and the development of a more efficient state machinery, and equally with the general emancipation of the Jews during the same period, which their own earlier emancipation had helped so much to bring about.

<sup>25</sup>*Ibid.*, I, 88.

<sup>26</sup>*Ibid.*, III, 255—6.